

# The Battle of Plassey and its Limerick Connections

The year 2007 marked the 250th anniversary of the battle that gave its name to the university area of Limerick. The Battle of Plassey was fought in 1757 in Bengal, India, between the forces of the British East India Company and those of the Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-daulah. At that time Portugal, Denmark, Holland and France, as well as Britain, had factories dotted around India. These were not colonies but trading stations, the continued existence of which was at the whim of the Mughal Emperor in Delhi or his regional governors. So it was that in 1756 the young new Nawab of Bengal decided to remove the British presence from his domain and attacked Calcutta.<sup>1</sup> There was no determined resistance and a large part of the garrison fled to the East Indiamen<sup>2</sup> lying off the town in the Hoogly River. The remainder held on as long as possible inside Fort William, but were forced to surrender. These prisoners were then herded into the military prison cell within the fort, which was known as the Black Hole. That night many of the prisoners died of heat exhaustion and dehydration, but the survivors were released the following morning. The story of the Black Hole of Calcutta passed into English folklore as an example of treacherous native cruelty but, while there is no doubt the event did occur, it is accepted that the numbers involved were exaggerated and that it more likely arose due to incompetence rather than a deliberate act of cruelty.

The British retreated downriver to Fulda and awaited help. This came in the form of a relieving force put together in Madras under the leadership of Robert Clive. His appointment was, however, not without controversy. Colonel Adlcrcon, the commander of the 39th Regiment, claimed seniority on the grounds that he was an officer in the regular British Army while Clive's commission was within the army of the East India Company. The upshot was that Adlcrcon refused to allow his troops to march under Clive's command. A compromise was then reached whereby a detachment of the 39th was allowed to serve as marines on board the ships accompanying the force, under the command of Admiral Watson. This question of precedence arose again when Calcutta was retaken. The town was attacked both from the land and the river. When it fell, Watson landed the detachment of the 39th which then refused entry to the land forces, claiming the town had been taken by the navy. This ludicrous situation was resolved by Clive's accept-

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by Brian Hodgkinson

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ance that the town had surrendered to the King, whereupon it was handed over to him as representative of the Company.

Once Calcutta was retaken, Clive signed a treaty with the Nawab and turned his guns against the nearby French factory at Chandernagore. Britain and France were by this time at war and so Clive wished to remove the French from Bengal before they could unite with the Nawab to the detriment of the Company. Having taken Chandernagore, Clive then resolved to remove the Nawab and replace him with someone more favourably disposed to the British. After much intrigue, the Company's army moved to Plassey, where it met the Nawab's forces. Clive's army numbered about 3,000 men, European and native. One of his units was the

newly formed Bengal European Regiment, made up men from Bombay and Madras units together with some sailors, local militia and volunteers from Bengal. This regiment later became the Munster Fusiliers and Plassey was their first battle honour. Ranged against Clive was an army of about 50,000, but part of it was under the command of Mir Jaffar, to whom Clive had promised the throne. Jaffar held his troops back and as a result Clive won an emphatic victory.

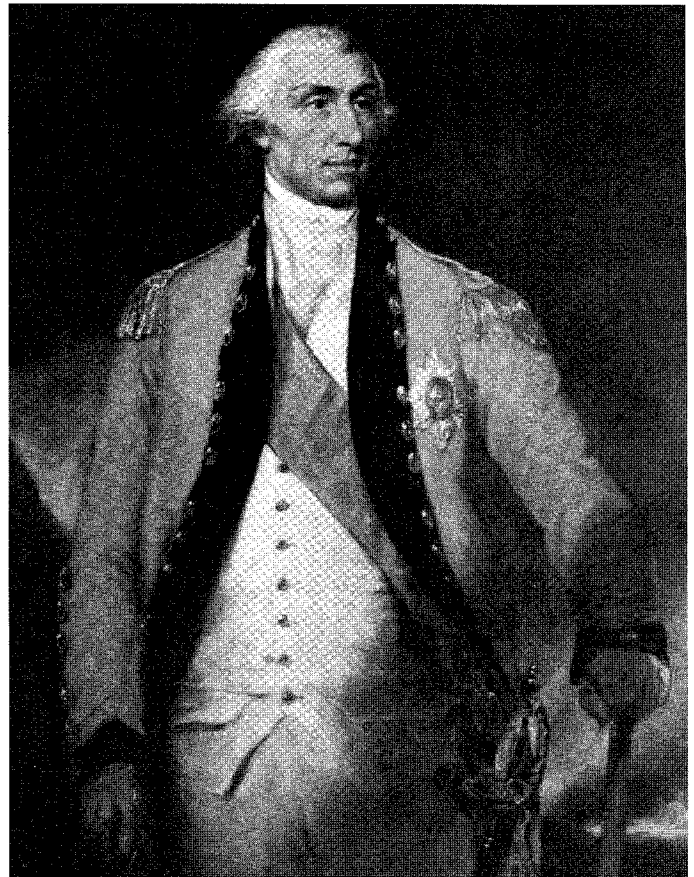
With the victory at Plassey and the replacement of Siraj with its own puppet, the Company entered a new phase of its existence. From tenant it had become kingmaker, which was its first step on the path to empire. The second step came in 1765, when the Mughal emperor granted the administration of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa to the Company in return for an annual payment. Over the next hundred years, the Company acquired more and



Clive from a mezzotint by McArdeU after a painting by Gainsborough



Siraj-ud-daulah from a portrait in the palace of Murshedabad



Coote by an unknown artist (Oriental Club, London)

more territory, but a private company owning an empire could not last. In 1857, the Company's sepoys, or native troops, mutinied and for a time the British hold on India was in danger. A number of grievances had caused the rebellion, but its timing was deliberate. A prediction that the Company's rule would last one hundred years was current and 1857 was that year. In the event it proved true, but not in the manner which the mutineers expected. British authority was re-imposed but the British government decided to take over direct rule and the Company was disbanded. The Mughal emperor was dethroned and shortly after, Queen Victoria was crowned Empress of India.

Surprisingly, there are several Limerick links to the Battle of Plassey. Clive, on his return to England, expected a peerage, but did not get elevated to the House of Lords. Instead, he bought two Irish estates to enable him to take a peerage in the Irish House of Lords. These estates lay for the most part in Co. Clare, but one of them included some houses in St Mary's parish in Limerick City. There was a local tradition that he must have owned Plassey House as well, but John Logan has recently demonstrated that this was not so.<sup>3</sup>

The man who became Clive's estate manager in Ireland was a Limerick man, Caleb Powell, who was later Collector of Limerick. He sailed to Madras in 1754 with a detachment of the 39th on board the *Kingfisher*, part of Admiral Watson's squadron. Clive was deputy governor in Madras when Powell arrived, so there is no doubt that they met in India. Limerick Museum has in its collection Powell's

commonplace book, which contains a very sparse diary for the period 1754-57.<sup>4</sup> Some troop movements are described in it, but he makes no mention at all of Plassey, so it appears he was not with the detachment of the 39th which fought in Bengal.

The officer in charge of that detachment of the 39th Regiment, the man who refused Clive entry to Calcutta, was another Limerick man, Eyre Coote. He was born at Ash Hill, Kilmallock, in 1726 and gazetted an ensign in the 27th Foot in June 1744.<sup>5</sup> His military career got off to an awful start when in 1746 he was court-martialled for cowardice after his regiment broke and ran when facing the Highlanders of Bonny Prince Charlie's army during the Jacobite Rebellion. He was found not guilty of cowardice but guilty of misbehaviour and suspended from duty, to be told later that His Majesty had no further occasion for his services. He seems to have tried to redeem himself with service in the 6th Dragoons in Germany and later became a lieutenant in the 37th Foot serving in Minorca. In 1755, he was promoted to captain and transferred into the 39th Foot, which was then serving in India. He was one of the officers present at the Council of War the night before Plassey and is credited with persuading Clive that an immediate attack was the best course of action. Coote's later achievements in southern India were to rival those of Clive in Bengal. He died in 1783.

It was yet another Limerick man, Thomas Maunsell, who gave the name to Plassey House to commemorate his role in the battle. He had gone to India in 1751 as a writer for the Company and was chosen

as civil commissary for the campaign in Bengal. After Plassey, it was Maunsell who organised the transport of the campaign booty to Madras. He left India in 1759 and in 1763 purchased Shreelane townland where Plassey House now stands. It therefore seems that it was Maunsell's share of the booty which helped pay for the purchase.

#### FURTHER READING

- Dalley, Jan: *The Black Hole, Money, Myth and Empire*, London, 2006.  
 Innes, Lt.-Col. P.R.: *The History of the Bengal European Regiment now the Royal Munster Fusiliers and how it helped to win India*, London, 1885.  
 Logan, John, *Robert Clive's Irish Peerage and Estate 1761-1842*, *N. Munster Antiquarian Journal*, Vol. 43, 2003, pp. 1-19.  
 Minney, R.J.: *Clive*, London, 1931.  
 Sheppard, E.W.: *Coote Bahadur; A Life of Lt.-General Sir Eyre Coote K.B.*, London, 1956.

#### REFERENCES

1. The old spellings of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay are retained for this article instead of the modern Kolkata, Chennai and Mumbai.
2. Large merchant ships well equipped with armaments to defend their cargo.
3. Logan, J, 'Robert Clive's Irish Peerage and Estate 1761-1842', *North Munster Antiquarian Journal* Vol 23, 2003, pp. 1-20.
4. LM2002.0041. For further details of Powell see Logan's article.
5. Blakeney's Regiment, later the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers.